Frederick. McCubbin.

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"MACEDON."

[*F. McCubbin.*

Frederick McCubbin

A Consideration

By Alexander Colquhoun

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5. Tom Roberts (In the Press)
6. J. Ford Paterson
7. W. B. McInnes (In the Press)
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The object of the series is to provide a little record of the work of the leading Australian Artists.

Though each book is by no means exhaustive, it has been the endeavour of the artists, the authors, and the publishers, to give in each a typical record of each man's best work.

The Publisher takes this opportunity of heartily thanking the various ladies and gentlemen, and particularly the trustees of the National Gallery, Melbourne. for their courtesy in allowing pictures in their possession to be reproduced in these books.

ALEXANDER McCUBBIN, 152 Elizabeth St., Melb.

Frederick McCubbin

A Consideration

By Alexander Colquhuon

THE late Frederick McCubbin was born in 1865, his father being Alexander McCubbin, master baker, of King-street, West Melbourne. He was one of a family of six children, and though from the beginning fame credits him with strong artistic propensities, his art productions showed little sign of that brilliant immaturity which so often characterises the work of youthful genius, and his promise for the future lay more—to the seeing eye—in the absolute sincerity and single-mindedness of his outlook, and in his unchanging fidelity, so far as conditions permitted, to nature.

In those days of the late eighties the facilities open to art students in Melbourne were limited to a primitive drawing school at the National Gallery, and an equally primitive Art Society, which held annual exhibitions on Eastern Hill, both sincere movements in their way, but both hopelessly out of touch with the progressive requirements of the hour and of the man. Conse-

quently the efforts of the young artist, though based on sound enough general principles, were in the main ill-directed.

Painting as then taught at the Gallery was confined to copying the pictures in the rather meagre national collection, the class being attended chiefly by young lady students, some of whom made good financial use of their opportunities by turning out frequent imitations of such popular works as "The Poultry Vendor" or "The Fern Gatherer."

In the midst of these unpromising conditions, but not of them, worked three young men—Fred McCubbin, Tom Roberts and C. D. Richardson—each viewing art from a different temperamental standpoint, but in accord in so far as the main issue was concerned.

These three formed, not without opposition, a life class at the Gallery, where they drew from the nude in a somewhat furtive and conscious fashion, for the public mind had not then been educated up to the point of nice discrimination in such matters.

In the absence of any definitely established laws for their guidance, these pioneers fell back to a certain extent on the thought of the old world, and showed a tendency to seek inspiration from Shakespeare or the pagan mythologies; but this phase passed, and gave place in time to a more direct and individual method of working.

"DOWN ON HIS LUCK."
[*F. McCubbin.*

Two old exponents of Australian landscape were alive at this time, Von Guerard and Louis Buvelot, the former being teacher at the Gallery school and a painter of a limited type. Buvelot was a worker of a different calibre, and his influence for good was felt and appreciated by the young men of his day, who, like those to come after them, owe much to the uplifting impetus his genius gave to Australian art. The departure of Von Guerard and the advent of G. F. Folingsby as Director of the National Gallery was an event which strongly influenced the hitherto wayward artistic progress of Fred McCubbin.

A school was now formed at the Gallery which, however much it may have fallen short of the possible, was, comparatively speaking, a revelation of method and efficiency.

One of the first to enter the new school, McCubbin studied assiduously, though his time was then much taken up in helping to carry on the family business, left without a head through the death of his father.

He adapted himself readily to the changed conditions and made rapid progress, taking leading place in the first of the now long series of Gallery annual exhibitions; but the strain of the ill-assorted double duties proved almost too much for the aspiring student, and at one time, in a spirit of despair, he put art from him for a space of six

months, only to return to it again with renewed ardour when the mood of despondency had passed.

As senior student in the Folingsby school, McCubbin was associated with E. P. Fox, John Longstaff (winner of the first travelling scholarship), T. St. G. Tucker, J. J. Gibbs, and the present writer, of which group only two survive today.

The work of the school consisted primarily in drawing from the antique, then in painting still-life and portraiture in the studios, which were at that time temporary canvas erections in the Statue Gallery, and later on subject compositions, the earliest development of the scholarship picture.

The first of these compositions was painted by McCubbin under the title "Home Again." It was in some respects an elementary performance, and the theme and arrangement presented no special difficulties—just a cottage interior with a woman engaged in some domestic duty and a man rushing in at the open door; yet its production cost the painter much thought and strenuous application before he succeeded in satisfying the fastidious Folingsby. The picture was shown at the second Gallery Exhibition, and it is worthy to be remembered as being the forerunner of the more matured and important performances of the "Down on His Luck" period.

"ON THE WALLABY."
[*F. McCubbin.*

Shortly after this the artist was, on the death of Mr. O. R. Campbell, appointed drawing instructor at the Gallery, a position which he retained with credit and efficiency till his death.

Folingsby was pre-eminently a studio painter, even when out-door subjects were in question; while the more robust and progressive instinct of McCubbin called him to the open air and the sunshine, so that when he ceased to be a pupil of the school he dropped many of its mannerisms, such as indoor landscape and the free use of bitumen; yet some of the dicta of his teacher, particularly the oft-repeated injunction to "keep it broad and simple and get good drawing into it," remained with him to the end.

The return of Tom Roberts from England, where he had spent some years studying at the Royal Academy Schools, primed with whatever was the latest in art, was something of an event, and his influence on McCubbin, which was as much personal as artistic, proved an uplifting and helpful one. Roberts tabooed bitumen shadows, preached the healthy gospel of sincerity, and presently a new trio was afoot with Arthur Streeton, then a young and newly discovered genius, taking the place of Richardson, who, like Roberts, had gone to England, not to return till some years later.

These three, whose watchword was the some-

what exclusive one of "let the strong men keep together," instituted a new cult—which might be termed the Box Hill cult, from the locality where its first painting camp was established—and though the direct motive of the three was their own personal advancement, they, at this stage in their climbing, raised the standard of Australian Art to a higher level than it had yet reached.

"Down on His Luck," the first of the series of important and topically Australian pictures, upon which the popular reputation of the artist largely rests, was painted during these halcyon days, and about this time (1889) the trio became a quartette by the addition to its numbers of a shy youth named Charles Condor, a wayward genius destined to achieve fame in after years—years, unfortunately, too few and troubled to bear the entire fulfilment of his promise.

In 1894 the artist and his wife—for he was now married—went to live at Blackburn, close to Box Hill, where he painted "The Bush Burial," and it is characteristic of the sincerity of purpose which pervaded all his dealings with art that in painting it he should dig a little grave in his back yard and pose Mrs. McCubbin (who was ever to him as a modern Saskia) on the brink in the character of the bereaved and grief-stricken mother. The obvious leaning in the art of Frederick McCubbin in the direction of arranged and descriptive compositions was fostered

"THE BUSH BURIAL."

[*F. McCubbin.*

by his training under Folingsby, whose views, though fundamentally sound, were biassed by the unstable traditions of the German school of Piloty and Hans Markart.

In dealing with the story picture, however, the artist unfailingly made the painting his first care, and never at any time descended to use his art as a frame on which to hang a narrative.

Much futility has been written and spoken concerning the subject picture. We know that Millais did, and that Whistler didn't, and that a great percentage of such pictures were produced less to express any truth, or even heresy, in art than to perpetuate the awful mid-Victorian principle that "every true work of art should tell its own story." With McCubbin the case was materially different, and in painting descriptively he used the life and environment of his country as he found it, in a manner more analagous in spirit to the early Flemish painters than to those of his own time. In later pictures, such as "The Pioneers" and "Lost in the Bush," the latter painted in 1907, there is a marked change in the quality of the work; it is looser and more suggestive, yet at the same time more matured in treatment, and clear for ever from the restraints of the school which are traceable in the earlier works.

Apart from picture producing this painter took an active share in most of the local art movements

of his time, and was one of the band of revolutionary students who, in the days of the old Academy of Arts, made successful war upon obsolete dogmatisms, and lived to be the leader of a group of veteran conservatives in art, facing boldly the onslaught of a new generation of revolutionaries.

The part McCubbin took, in conjunction with John Ford Paterson, G. R. Ashton, Walter Withers, John Mather, C. D. Richardson and others in the building up of the Victorian Artists' Society was a strenuous one, and his big vigorous canvases often gave a saving air of substance and reality to the exhibitions, which they would otherwise have lacked.

He was several times president of the Society, and resigned definitely and finally about 1908, in conjunction with a number of contemporaries, among whom were John Mather and Walter Withers, to form the more restful and conservative Australian Art Association, of which body he remained a highly valued member and contributor until his death.

McCubbin in his time painted many portraits, and, though his work in this respect shows inequalities, the best examples, including those of his friend, the late Louis Abrahams, and the late J. A. Panton, P.M., place him in the front rank of Australian portrait painters.

The acquirement of a cottage at Macedon about

"THE PIONEERS."

[*F. McCubbin.*

1901 was an event in the McCubbin family, and from this time dates the fine series of mountain landscapes on which the artist's later reputation is chiefly built, one of the first being the triptych "Pioneers," now hanging in the Melbourne National Gallery. Others followed in quick succession, works less literal in execution than the earlier ones, but full of a new and happy inspiration.

A further fateful movement was the removal, after many suburban sojournings, of the town address to Kensington-road, South Yarra, the residence being quite an ancient house, dating back over seventy years, to the time when South Yarra was a sheep run, and commanding a wide outlook over the river, the city and its north-eastern environments. It proved an exceptional painting ground, different from Macedon, but with a splendid space value of its own. A typical example of the work done there is "Moonrise," painted in 1909.

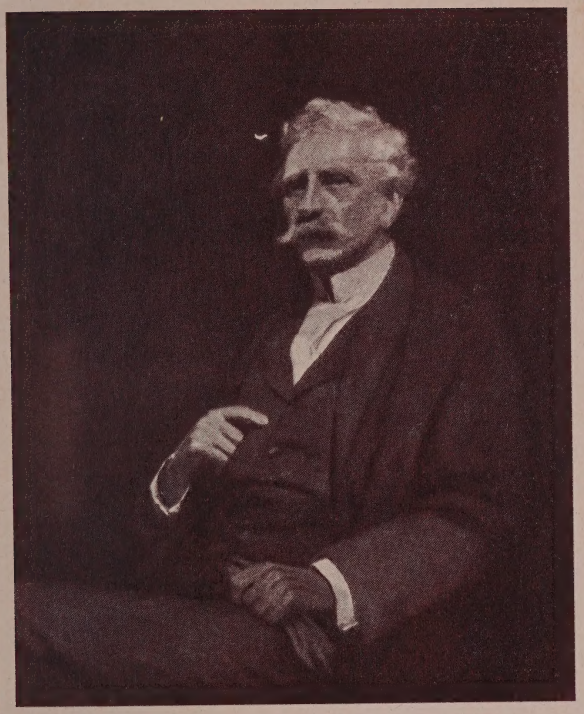
While living here the artist, who had so far, with the exception of a trip to Tasmania, never been out of Australia, decided to visit Europe. The opportunity came late in life, but was none the less acceptable on that account, and a year spent in London, Paris and Italy came as a revelation in fact, of the glories hitherto known only through the media of reproduction or written description.

The sudden transition from the still waters of Australia to what may be termed the vortexes of art, and the amount of new experience he was called upon to absorb in a short space of time, was almost too great for even his large capacity, and for a term after his return he found it difficult to settle down to the normal stride of his peculiar genius. The sense of confusion passed, however, leaving only a treasure of vivid and enduring memories, which gave added sparkle and interest to the artist's well-known qualities as a conversationalist.

Many notable pictures were now painted, among them the self portrait purchased by the Adelaide National Gallery, "Hauling Timber, Macedon," and the portrait of his old friend, Mr. Harry Abrahams.

For about two years before his death Mr. McCubbin suffered from a bronchial affection, which, though intermittent in its nature, became by slow degrees worse, causing at first lapses in his life work, and finally entire cessation.

Apart from his purely professional qualities this painter possessed in a higher degree than any of his contemporaries in art a strong and attractive individuality, in which even the failings leaned to virtue's side. With all his sociability one word of two letters frequently found him tongue-tied; but his failure to utter it was generally owing to the fear of hurting someone



PORTRAIT OF J. PANTON, ESQ.
[*F. McCubbin.*

else's feelings—possibly an entirely unworthy someone. He was an extensive and discriminating reader, particularly in the direction of biography and the higher fiction, and it was his common habit to memorise what he read and deliver it to the first receptive friend he came across in the form of a brief but glowing epitomy. The occasion may have been the opening of an exhibition or a chance meeting in a tram, and with another man the thing might have proved boresome, but with McCubbin never.

During a long knowledge of him I never heard him express any very definite views on religious matters, yet his attitude in this respect did not fail in reverence or in a generous trust in the ultimate larger hope.

My last memory of Fred McCubbin was an informal visit he paid me at my home one Sunday morning. We smoked a contemplative cigarette together, talking reminiscently over old times, and more intimately of the present, of the war and what it had meant for both of us, of his soldier sons, Hugh (wounded on Gallipoli), Louis (the artist, in camp), and my own boy who would not come back.

The vehement book talk was gone with the old militant art spirit once so characteristic of him, and in its place the restfulness and tolerance of a man who saw above and beyond these things.

He died at his home in South Yarra two weeks later on, leaving a widow and a family of two daughters and four sons, the elder of whom bids fair to fill his father's place in the world of Australian Art.

"THE GREAT GUMS."

[*F. McCubbin.*

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